

Zoning appeals board approves Suburban Hospital expansion

By [Katherine Shaver](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, October 20, 2010; 7:39 PM

Montgomery County's zoning appeals board approved [Suburban Hospital's](#) proposal to build an addition and a parking garage Wednesday but required it to keep 12 houses that it had planned to demolish for the expansion.

The five-member board agreed with residents in the adjacent Huntington Terrace neighborhood that the hospital's plans to replace the houses with landscaping would diminish the area's residential feel. However, the panel agreed to allow the hospital to tear down two hospital-owned houses on Southwick Street to make way for the new garage and demolish nine houses on Lincoln Street if it wins separate approval to permanently close part of the street.

The ruling is the latest in a three-year zoning battle between Suburban and nearby residents over the hospital's \$230 million plan to build a 300,000-square-foot addition and a four-story parking garage in Bethesda, where open land is scarce and neighbors are close. Suburban is across Old Georgetown Road from the National Institutes of Health and is bordered on three sides by homes.

"We're thrilled," said Leslie Ford Weber, a senior vice president for Suburban. "The project approved is what we've been about - meeting the health-care needs of people in our community."

Hospital officials say Suburban needs the expansion, its first major one in 30 years, to meet the demands of being Montgomery's only trauma center and to comply with state regulations, such as having operating rooms near the emergency room. The hospital, which was acquired by Johns Hopkins Medicine last year, also wants to add private patient rooms and physician office space.

Amy Shiman, president of the Huntington Terrace Citizens' Association, which fought the hospital with its own lawyer and volunteers, said that she was grateful the board spared some of the houses from demolition but that residents will be left with a "behemoth, football-field-sized parking garage" in their midst.

"I'm disappointed the board was so biased in favor of Suburban Hospital's existing plan," Shiman said. She said the community hadn't decided whether to appeal the board's decision to the Montgomery County Circuit Court.

The case centered on the legal question of whether the effects of Suburban's growth plans on the community went beyond those considered "inherent" for a hospital in a residential area.

The board rejected a hearing examiner's June recommendation, made after 34 days of hearings spanning a year and a half, that the hospital should find more ways to minimize neighborhood effects to comply with the county's master plan. Among other findings, Francoise M. Carrier determined that the hospital should spare 15 of the 23 houses it wanted to demolish to help the area retain its residential feel. Carrier is chairman of the Montgomery County Planning Board.

The panel, which is appointed by the County Council, was most divided over the hospital's plans to tear down the houses it has bought and rented out since 1953 to install gardens as a buffer between the hospital and remaining houses. Residents said they preferred the houses and mature trees as a buffer.

The board permitted two houses on Southwick to be torn down to make way for the parking garage but said that sparing eight houses on Grant, three on McKinley and one on Southwick was needed to retain the community's feel.

"If you live next to a hospital, you expect to hear sirens or have a certain amount of traffic," board member Walter S. Booth said during the three-hour public work session in Rockville. "What you don't expect is all of your neighbors' houses are going to disappear."

David K. Perdue, the board's vice chairman, initially proposed to allow Suburban to raze all 23 homes. He said that house displacement was an "inevitable consequence" of having institutions in residential areas - such as hospitals, private schools or country clubs - that might need to grow. Therefore, he said, Suburban's plans to demolish its own houses didn't go beyond its "inherent" impacts as an institution in a residential area.

Weber said the hospital will need to seek a variance to exceed restrictions on buildings covering no more than 35 percent of a property. She said the addition would cause Suburban to exceed that percentage because the new buildings were designed assuming that the 12 houses spared by the board would be torn down and replaced with open space.

The board also approved the project on the condition that Suburban not buy any more homes beyond Southwick, Grant or McKinley streets to allay community concerns that it would continue to expand into the neighborhood.

The County Council will decide whether to grant the hospital's request to permanently close Lincoln Street between Old Georgetown Road and Grant Street, which Suburban officials say they need to unify their 15 acres into a contiguous campus.

Residents said they will continue to oppose the closure because it would reduce their access to Old Georgetown Road and lead to more traffic on other neighborhood streets.

A different hearing examiner heard arguments in the street closure case in August 2008 but has not issued a recommendation.